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## The Search for Consistent Achievement: *Scheduling Methods and Their Effects on the At-Risk Rural High School*

**Marsha Thibodeaux**

### Introduction

Although much research has been devoted to the effects of scheduling methods in urban high schools, schedules in rural schools are still a concern. Jenkins (1996) observes that the class schedule controls the activities of the high school more than any other component. In fact, a poor schedule may inhibit learning, while a good schedule encourages innovation (Canady, 1995).

"Student schedules are often based on tradition rather than educational merit," states J. Allen Queen (2000). The traditional school day is usually divided into seven periods. Classes meet at the same time daily, with students changing teachers each period. Educators complain that the constantly shifting traditional schedule creates an ineffective learning environment (Rettig & Canady, 1999), yet many districts return to their noncontroversial constitution after experimenting with alternative timetables (Hottenstein, 1998). One such alternative is the 4x4-block schedule, where four classes are condensed into one semester, and each class period spans 90-120 minutes. One advantage of this system is that if students fail a course, they may still be able to graduate with their class by retaking the course the following semester (Rettig & Canady 1999; Wilson & Stokes, 1999).

### Method

At Varnado High School in Washington Parish, Louisiana, the 4x4 block has been in place for three years. In order to compare the two schedules, I obtained the Louisiana Department of Education's District Composite Report for Washington Parish. This report contains data concerning dropout rates and ACT scores from two traditionally scheduled school years (1995-1997), the year of 4x4-block implementation (1997-1998), and two years of the block (1998-2000).

More districts are relying on standardized test scores in order to determine a school's success; therefore, I also analyzed passing rates from the state-mandated Graduate Exit Examination (GEE) for the same time period.

Using perspectives gathered from literature regarding the 4x4 block and traditional schedules, I developed a qualitative survey for the 12th grade class of Varnado High School. Only seniors were surveyed to maximize test/retake opportunity validity and exposure to the traditional and block schedules. This survey was approved by The University of Southern Mississippi's Human Subjects Protection Review Committee. After receiving written permission from the participants and their parents, the survey was administered during class: 38 out of 53 surveys were completed, netting a return percentage of 71.6.



*Thibodeaux in the lobby of the Liberal Arts Building.*



To further determine the block schedule's effect on the population at Varnado High, I informally interviewed teachers in English (2), business (1), mathematics (1), science (1), and history (1). Teachers were asked about their perceptions of students' preparation for life after high school and the effects of the block schedule on student achievement. As a matter of privacy, I have changed their names.

## Results

### *The Surveys and Discussions*

The participants in the student survey ranged from 17-19 years old. Fifty-eight percent reported a grade point average of 2.0 to 2.99, with most passing the GEE after only one try. The overwhelming majority (87%) of participants said they would not revert to the traditional schedule. Students reported less stress because of fewer classes and claimed that the longer class period afforded them a chance to better discuss topics. Donna, a business teacher with 15 years' experience, said that she prefers longer blocks because it gives students a chance to practice more at one sitting (important for those unable to access business machines at home). The ability to retake a failed class during the next semester was another benefit that students and teachers mentioned frequently, consistent with Canady's and Rettig's findings.

The seniors were also asked which schedule they felt might be better suited to Varnado High's needs. Only three felt the block was ineffective. One 18-year-old female student who preferred the traditional schedule wrote, "It seems to put less stress by having four (classes) at a time, but in the end is where you realize that you didn't learn as much as you could've or should've." Several teachers echoed her thoughts. Sam, an upper-level English teacher, complained that because of the shortened course length, he doesn't

have the time to work with each student on weaknesses in their writing. Additionally, he said, seniors only have a 14-week term in the spring, thus reducing the amount of classroom time even more.

Overall, students reacted favorably to the 4x4 block schedule. Almost half of the students felt

they had been adequately prepared for their prospects after graduation, whether those plans included college, the military, or work. Conversely, five of the six teachers interviewed (all but the business teacher) felt that the block schedule had actually harmed students' academic achievement. They cited a lack of avail-

able repetition over the course of the class as one major roadblock to consistent test scores. Ultimately, though, the teachers acknowledged their limited role in student preparation. As one student said, "If I am not prepared, it is my fault."

### *The Composite Reports*

Louisiana's district composite reports from 1995-2000 offer a general comparison of academic achievement between the traditional and the 4x4 block schedules. Although the block was enacted in an attempt to raise GEE scores, there has been no significant increase in science and only slight increases in mathematics and social studies. The English teacher's concerns about his students' skills seem to have some validity. In language arts, scores have fallen from 82% passing in 1995-96 to 67% in 1999-00. Passing rates for written composition fell from 92% to 74%.

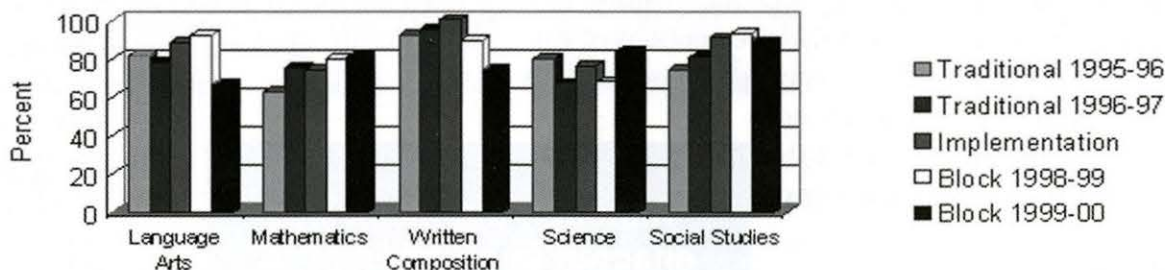
More than half the seniors surveyed (22) wanted to go to college or trade school. Most of those students felt prepared for their prospective courses. One indicator of college readiness is the composite

**"Although the block was enacted in an attempt to raise GEE scores, there has been no significant increase in science and only slight increases in mathematics and social studies."**

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GEE Passing Rates



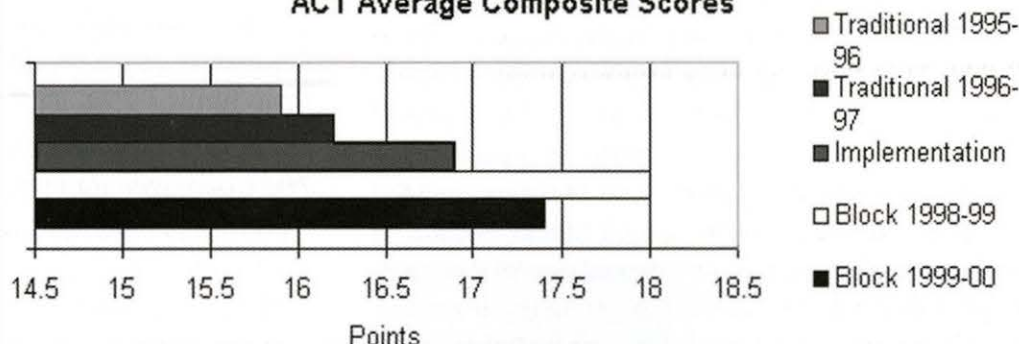
American College Test (ACT) score. The ACT measures mastery of language skills, mathematics, and science, and universities often apply a minimum composite score of 18 for acceptance and for scholarship considerations. Varnado's ACT scores in the traditional schedule were far below the standard baseline. After implementation of the block, average scores rose to a high of 18 before dipping again.

One positive consequence of the block's implementation can be seen in the number of students who permanently leave school. Dropout rates have fallen sharply since the 4x4 schedule was enacted, though no data were available for 1999-00. This may be correlated to the ability to retake courses without waiting an entire year. Since students reported in their surveys that they felt less stress with regard to their courses, they may feel more able to handle the requirements to graduate.

### Conclusions

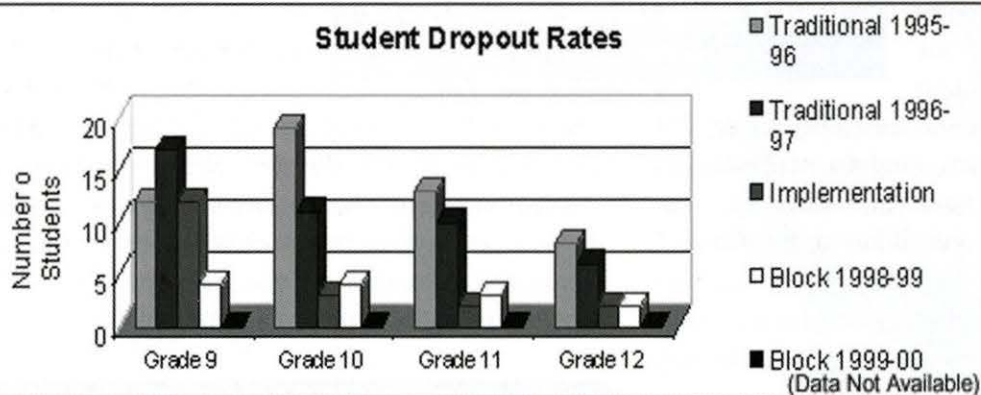
As a tool to raise test scores, 4x4 block scheduling seems to have failed its supporters. The block schedule has had no significant positive effect on the academic achievement of Varnado High School. In fact, English skills seem to have suf-

ACT Average Composite Scores



fered from the condensed schedule. However, aspects that threaten life achievement of Varnado's at-risk students, such as the high dropout rate, have reflected a definite turn for the positive. With students staying in school longer, they have the chance to truly prepare for the challenges that face them after high school.

Student Dropout Rates



Other factors also contribute to a student's feeling of preparation and the effort put forth to master a subject. Students were asked if, given the chance, they would change any aspect of their high school experience. One disturbing



comment from a female participant stands out. She answered, "No, because if God wanted me to be math smart or anything else I have trouble in, He would have made me like that. So I would not change." Comments like these raise the question of whether some of these students feel they are capable or even worthy of a better life. The values and goals that students are instilled with at home play a major role in their concept of their abilities.

Another signifier of student achievement, though imperfect, is the grade attained in each course. In subsequent studies, course grades and content should be contrasted with performance and content on individual graduate exams. This would account for any concerns of inflated grades and hence, inflated sense of student preparation. Students may do well on the material that is covered in class, but that material may not coincide with what is being tested. A teacher's personal style may also be a possible threat to the efficiency of the block schedule; if educators have not been properly trained in new teaching methods, they are unlikely to use them (Queen).

Several other possible alternatives have been suggested for scheduling in high schools. A variation of the block schedule, the modified A-B block, is one that mimics a college semester schedule. Another concept (successfully used for years in the elementary setting) is looping, in which a teacher intentionally stays with the same class for two or more years. It has only recently been explored as a viable option for secondary schools. Yet another possibility, though it would require more delicate planning, is to perhaps combine the strengths of the traditional schedule with the benefits of the 4x4 block. Since there are several half-credit courses required for graduation, then if a student fails the first semester of one class, they could be rescheduled into a half-credit course in the second semester.

There are virtually no limits to the choices school districts have for increasing student achievement in all areas, but the school schedule can neither be fully credited nor blamed for student accomplishment. ♦



**Thibodeaux finds a quiet place to work on the fourth floor of the Liberal Arts Building.**

### About the Author

*Marsha Thibodeaux is a senior in English education from Varnado, La. She is married with one daughter, 7. Marsha has earned a 3.76 GPA and is a distinguished Ronald E. McNair Scholar. Her article is an excerpt from her McNair thesis, which she presented at the National McNair Conference in Lake Delavan, Wis. Marsha is a member of the Mississippi Professional Educators, the National Council of Teachers of English, as well as Kappa Delta Pi and Phi Theta Kappa.*

*In addition to her professional affiliations, she participates in Congressman David Vitter's Women's Leadership Forum, which advises on policy regarding education and family issues. Marsha plans to pursue a doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in rural schools, with hopes of developing curriculum for schools in rural areas.*

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